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SUBJECT: TIBET: MFA ORGANIZES TIGHTLY CONTROLLED TRIP TO LHASA FOR DIPLOMATS, MARCH 28-29

REF: BEIJING 975

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Dan Piccuta.

Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) With less than 24-hours notice to participating Embassies, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) Government, organized an overnight trip to Lhasa March 28 to 29. Fifteen Beijing-based diplomats, including PolOff, participated. Diplomats were shown destroyed shops, a burnt school building and two hospitals treating wounded security officers and civilians. The trip was tightly controlled and Chinese journalists were present at nearly all meetings. PolOff observed extensive damage to shops starting two to three blocks east of the Potala Palace and increasing in areas closer to the Tibetan quarter. TAR officials sought to demonstrate that both Han and Tibetans had suffered as a result of the violence and rioting. While PolOff saw a significant presence of regular police, there was a noticeable absence of military vehicles or anti-riot equipment. The delegation met with TAR Chairman Qiangba Puncog. At the meeting with Qiangba Puncog, diplomats pressed for details about the number of dead and the charges against those currently under detention. PolOff urged China to exercise restraint and engage in substantive dialogue with the Dalai Lama's representatives. PolOff also repeated to the TAR Chairman the USG's request for unfettered access for diplomats to all Tibetan areas.

¶12. (C) Summary continued. In response to the diplomatic delegation's collective request to visit the Jokhang Temple and speak with monks involved in a March 27 demonstration in front of an MFA-led group of foreign journalists, MFA and TAR officials arranged a hasty visit to Barkhor Square and the Jokhang on the morning of March 29. Diplomats met with a single monk, who said all of his colleagues were "sleeping" and thus "unavailable" to meet with the delegation. The Barkhor area was almost devoid of people, save for security attached to the delegation. Organizers denied PolOff's requests to venture into the city to meet with Amcits, but PolOff was given the opportunity to meet with one Amcit at the delegation's hotel. Government organizers also arranged for foreign residents of Lhasa, including two American NGO

workers, to attend a briefing with Tibetan scholars and Buddhist figures, where PolOff was able to speak with them. The foreign residents were mainly chosen by the TAR Government, however, not the participating diplomats. Comment: Although some of the events on this trip were crudely stage-managed, it is clear that Lhasa has suffered widespread ethnic-based violence and rioting. A large percentage of the population, Han and Tibetan, have suffered great economic loss, both from the rioting itself and the cancellation of tour groups. Interlocutors' complete lack of candor about the underlying social factors contributing to the riots, while not unexpected, was disturbing nonetheless. End Summary.

"We Leave For Lhasa Tomorrow"

¶3. (C) Ministry of Foreign Affairs U.S. Affairs Division Director An Gang told PolOff March 27 that the MFA's Department of External Security Affairs, in cooperation with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Foreign Affairs Office (FAO), was organizing a trip for foreign diplomats to Lhasa, leaving the next morning, March 28. Embassy Beijing was given one hour by the MFA to register a participant for the trip, which would involve a total of 25 hours on the ground in Lhasa. In addition to U.S. Embassy Beijing, the Beijing Embassies/Missions of Brazil, Japan, Germany, Canada, the European Commission, Italy, Spain, Slovenia (as EU President), Singapore, Tanzania (as Africa Union President), the United Kingdom, Australia, France and Russia also sent

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representatives. At 17:00 on March 27, participating diplomats were called to a briefing presided over by Vice Foreign Minister (VFM) Wu Dawei. VFM Wu told the group that the MFA was organizing the trip so that diplomats could provide "more correct reports" on the situation in Lhasa and Tibet to their respective capitals. VFM Wu offered no details about the itinerary, other than the TAR FAO would provide the schedule to the delegation upon arrival in Lhasa. VFM Wu also said that, although the situation in Lhasa was "generally stable," for safety reasons everyone must abide by the "arrangements" set by the MFA and the TAR Government. PolOff told VFM Wu that AmEmbassy Beijing viewed the trip, and a similar trip organized the same week for foreign journalists, as a "first step" but reiterated the USG's request that diplomats and journalists have free and unfettered access to all Tibetan areas affected by recent unrest.

Chinese Media Presence

¶4. (C) In addition to numerous minders from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, plain-clothes security personnel and the TAR FAO, at least two Xinhua print journalists and a China Central Television (CCTV) journalist and cameraman accompanied the delegation. CCTV crews filmed most events on the trip, including the arrival and departure at Lhasa airport. Xinhua News Agency quoted accurately, though selectively, some delegation member's positive comments about the trip, particularly a statement by Tanzanian Minister George Manongi (representing the African Union) that "no government would tolerate" violent protests.

Security Presence Observed in Lhasa

¶5. (C) The delegation's motorcade included both police and People's Armed Police (PAP) escorts. (Plate numbers for PAP vehicles seen by PolOff, including

those attached to the motorcade, all started with WJ 23.) The airport road appeared to be open to other traffic during the delegation's arrival and departure from Lhasa. PolOff saw at least two groups of Tibetans picnicking very close to the road. As the motorcade neared Lhasa proper, PolOff saw numerous PRC flags flying over Tibetan-style homes. At nearly every intersection where village roads met the main airport road, a single officer was stationed with his or her back to the motorcade, looking down the approaching roadway. PolOff observed no checkpoints at any point on the trip except for one on the airport road that appeared little different from a normal traffic police checkpoint.

¶6. (C) The security presence in Lhasa was noticeable and significantly larger than that observed by PolOff during a visit to Lhasa with ConGen Chengdu officers February 26-29, 2008. At least one police vehicle (mainly sedans and SUVs) and one to three officers were seen at most intersections. Police officers were mainly sitting in, or standing next to, their vehicles rather than walking the streets. At one point, PolOff saw several police poke their heads out of a police station doorway to watch the motorcade pass by. PolOff saw only scattered PAP vehicles other than those attached to the delegation. PolOff observed no officers in riot gear, nor did he see any heavier police vehicles such as water cannon trucks. During a visit to the Jokhang Temple March 29, some diplomats reported seeing a few helmeted police in side streets leading off Barkhor Square. Over the course of the trip, PolOff saw three canvas-covered military transport trucks; one had its plates covered, the other two were without plates entirely. (Note: An Amcit resident (protect) told PolOff that a large number of security forces remained in Lhasa but they had been confined to compounds during the Government-organized visits that week by foreign journalists and diplomats. A TAR FAO minder told delegation members that no PLA assets were used to suppress the March 14 riots.)

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Fewer People on Streets

¶7. (C) At est, PolOff observed pedestrian traffic at a tir of the level it was in late February, thoug in some areas it was much less. During te late afternoon of March 28, PolOff observedfewer than ten Tibetan pilgrims with prayer weels walking in front of the Potala Palace. Te next day, March 29, PolOff observed well over a hundred pilgrims walking on the Potala circumambulation route. During this second drive-by, a TAR FAO minder highlighted the presence of the pilgrims to PolOff. In contrast to February, when pilgrims of various ages and dress could be seen in Lhasa, the pilgrims observed during this visit, in addition to being fewer in number, also appeared to be primarily elderly Tibetans. Also, areas in the Tibetan quarter that were packed with pilgrims in February looked nearly abandoned. One street near the Ramoche Temple was blocked by a police cordon, and behind this barrier, PolOff could see few, if any, people. From the motorcade on Beijing East Road looking into the Barkhor area, PolOff also saw streets that were nearly devoid of people. Diplomats who participated in a March 29 stop at the Jokhang Temple reported that the streets in the Barkhor district were practically abandoned.

Arrival and Visit to Affected Areas

¶8. (C) Immediately upon arrival in Lhasa on March 28, organizers took the delegation to a clothing store on Beijing Middle Road where four Han and one Tibetan shopkeeper had been killed. As the delegation pulled up to the store, the Han Chinese owner and a surviving Tibetan shop assistant were kneeling before a memorial altar set up in the burnt-out shop. Shortly after the delegation's arrival, they emerged to speak with diplomats as television cameras rolled. Next, the delegation was led on a driving tour of Beijing Road, Qingnian Road, and North and East Linkuo Road to view damaged businesses and homes. TAR FAO interpreters pointed out damage to Xinhua News Agency offices, the Tibet Daily and a Bank of China branch. An FAO minder also pointed out that a local television station and stores carrying mobile phones, foreign-branded goods and precious gems had been specifically target by rioters/looters.

Visit to Damaged School

¶9. (C) The delegation was then taken to Lhasa Second Middle School where an entire classroom building had been gutted by fire. The Tibetan principal of the school described the efforts of staff to protect the children on March 14 and how rioters had allegedly set fire to the building and then blocked fire trucks from arriving on the scene. The fire also consumed many of the schools' textbooks, she said. According to the principal, 80 percent of the school's 839 students are ethnic Tibetan, in keeping with the population of the surrounding neighborhood. The teaching staff was 90 percent Tibetan. In addition to standard Mandarin Chinese curriculum taught in China, students at Lhasa Second Middle School receive 280 minutes of Tibetan and 200 minutes of English instruction per week. Diplomats then observed primary school students taking a history lesson in a science lab that had been converted into an ordinary classroom since the March 14 fire. At the back of the classroom was a display condemning the March 14 riots. An FAO handler remarked to a delegation member that the "lawbreakers do not want to see good schools and the development of society."

Extent of Damage

¶10. (C) Judging by the very limited tour given to the diplomats, the area of Lhasa west of the Potala Palace seemed unaffected by the rioting. Individual burned out stores could be seen starting two to three blocks

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east of the Potala, with the ratio of damaged to undamaged shops increasing as one neared the Ramoche Temple/Barkhor area. At some points along Beijing East and Lingkhor North and East Roads, entire rows of shops had been burned or damaged. On Beijing East Road, PolOff saw that the (Nepali/Tibetan operated) Kyichu Hotel had only a single broken window while the neighboring six shops, by contrast, including a Han-run sunglass store visited by PolOff in February, had been completely burned out. Despite extensive damage to stores, all roads were clean, and PolOff saw little debris on sidewalks. In the areas east of the Potala Palace, about a third of stores remained shuttered, making it difficult to assess whether shops were damaged or just closed. For every store that was burned out, at least ten others showed signs of damage to the metal rolling shutter or broken windows. All over Lhasa, PolOff saw white katas (Tibetan greeting scarves) affixed to storefronts, an indication that the store is Tibetan-owned (reftel).

¶11. (SBU) Following the tour and check-in at the Lhasa Hotel (in a largely unaffected area of west Lhasa) on the evening of March 28, the delegation arrived at the TAR Government compound for a meeting with TAR Chairman Qiangba Puncog and a large contingent of high-level TAR officials, including the Mayor of Lhasa Doje Cezhug. (Note: As TAR Chairman, Qiangba Puncog is equivalent to a provincial governor and is ranked behind the top PRC official in Tibet, TAR Party Chairman Zhang Qingli.) After introductions and before Qiangba Puncog could read his prepared report, the Slovenian Counselor, Bernard Srajner asked the TAR Chairman a series of questions prepared in advance by the EU participants. A summary of the EU questions and Qiangba Puncog's answers (both in his prepared remarks and response to follow up questions) follows:

--What is the fate of 13 people arrested in a demonstration on March 10? The TAR Chairman said 15 people (13 monks and 2 lay people) had participated in the March 10 demonstration in Lhasa, which included raising the "snow mountain flag." The thirteen monks are among 303 total people detained, but Qiangba Puncog gave no additional information on what the 13 monks were charged with. (Note: The figure of 303 detained appeared to be a figure for detainees related to demonstrations prior to March 14.)

--What happened in the first 24 hours of March 14? Why did security forces "hold back" at first? Qiangba Puncog repeated a standard Government version of events, saying the March 14 "beating, smashing, looting, and burning" incident had been "masterminded" by the Dalai Lama clique in an attempt to sabotage the Olympics. Police and PAP officers had exercised restraint. Government forces had not used firearms, though authorities confiscated some "lead bullet" guns from some rioters. (Comment: The term "lead bullet" guns seemed to indicate non-police, makeshift firearms.) The TAR Chairman said the TAR Government had failed to protect civilians, and he apologized to victims in the hospitals.

--How many people were killed and injured? The TAR Chairman repeated published casualty figures. He said 382 innocent civilians had been injured, 58 seriously. Eighteen "innocent civilians" had been killed, including an infant below the age of one. In addition, one police officer and three rioters were killed. Seven schools, 5 hospitals, 908 shops and 120 private residences had been damaged with total losses amounting to RMB 250 million (\$36 million).

--What is the nature of charges against detainees? Will independent observers be allowed at trials? As a result of the March 14 riot, 414 people had been detained. An additional 289 had turned themselves in, although 111 of these people had already been released because their crimes were "minor." Qiangba Puncog said PRC law prohibits splittism. Defendants will be

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charged not for their views, but for their "public actions." All cases will be dealt with according to law. Some who committed "small crimes" will be released but the more "serious" cases will go to trial. All defendants will have access to legal counsel, including legal aid for those who have no money to afford a defense attorney. (Note: While Qiangba Puncog did not directly answer the question about outside observers, the Canadian participant said the head of the TAR Justice Department (si fa ting) later told her at a banquet immediately afterward that

outside observers would not be possible.)

--What has happened to monks who demonstrated at the Jokhang Temple in front of visiting journalists? Qiangba Puncog characterized the incident as an example of "Government tolerance." It was "natural" for some people to have different views, and the monks will not be punished, he said. The Australian participant, in a follow-up question, asked for a visit to the Jokhang Temple to speak with the monks involved in the incident. The Chairman said TAR authorities would consider adding a Jokhang visit to the schedule. (Note: A hastily arranged visit to the Jokhang was arranged the next morning, as reported below.)

"We Are Already Restrained and Non-Violent"

¶12. (C) During the meeting with the TAR Chairman, PolOff stated USG points regarding the need for China to exercise restraint and for all sides to refrain from violence. China should respect the legal rights of peaceful protestors and enter substantive dialogue with representatives of the Dalai Lama. PolOff ended by saying, while the current trip was a positive step in the right direction, the USG still seeks unfettered access for diplomats to all Tibetan areas, inside and outside the TAR. More and better access was in the interests of all sides, PolOff said. Qiangba Puncog responded that he already understood the U.S. position and that Chinese President Hu Jintao had already discussed the Tibet situation directly with President Bush. China is "already exercising restraint and refraining from violence," so such calls are unnecessary. It was because of this restraint, including no use of lethal weapons by security forces, that the riot took so long to get under control. The TAR Government places great importance on the visit by diplomats, Qiangba Puncog said, urging delegation members to report the "real situation" to their respective "highest leaders."

¶13. (SBU) Qiangba Puncog also defended China's economic and religious policies in Tibet. The TAR Governor highlighted a string of new measures, announced the following day in TAR newspapers, designed to provide economic relief to victims of the rioting. He noted that Tibet was experiencing high growth rates and rising income, thanks in no small part to Central Government support. Prices were stable in the TAR following the unrest, he asserted. There was no need to adjust Government policies regarding religion, he said. After the meeting, Qiangba Puncog hosted a banquet for the delegation, followed by the screening of a documentary film on the March 14 riots.

Meeting with U.S. Citizens

¶14. (C) PolOff requested that, instead of watching the documentary on March 28, he be allowed to go out on his own to visit with American citizens in Lhasa. Several other diplomats also requested time to meet with their citizens in lieu of the film. The TAR FAO agreed to excuse PolOff and other diplomats from the film, but only on condition that meetings with citizens take place at the Lhasa Hotel. PolOff was told he could not venture outside of the hotel "for safety reasons." PolOff contacted three Amcits. Two noted that foreigners were still instructed to stay indoors at night, making a 21:00 meeting at the hotel impractical. One Amcit, a long-term Lhasa resident who lives close to the hotel, agreed to visit with

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PolOff in the hotel lobby. (Note: The Amcit reported

that he was fine, though some money had been looted from one of his downtown Lhasa shops, which had also been sprayed by gunfire. The Amcit also noted that tension in the city between ethnic Tibetans and Han remains.)

¶115. (C) Delegation members were given a second chance to meet with their respective citizens, though trip organizers, not the diplomats, controlled who was invited. During the pre-trip briefing with VFM Wu Dawei, several diplomats requested that they be given a chance to meet with their respective citizens in Lhasa. VFM Wu said such meetings would likely be possible but had to take place at the delegation's hotel. Some Embassies, but not the United States, provided contact information for their citizens in Lhasa to the MFA to facilitate meetings. The TAR FAO, in response to this request, then apparently invited about ten foreign residents to attend the final meeting of the trip March 29, a briefing by TAR scholars and official religious figures. The delegation was not provided with any name list prior to the meeting. Upon arrival, PolOff learned that two Amcit NGO workers, one of whom had declined an invitation to meet PolOff at the hotel the previous evening, were present. The foreign residents mainly sat and listened as the Tibetan scholars denounced the Dalai Lama. PolOff asked that the meeting be cut short to allow time for individual discussions with citizens. One of the Amcits told PolOff his organization's "local partner" had encouraged him to attend the meeting, which he did for the sake of maintaining cooperative relations. The other, the Tibet director for a multi-national environmental NGO, indicated that his boss at the NGO had requested that he attend. PolOff told both that they were under no obligation to meet with USG officials. However, both voluntarily met with PolOff for about 15 minutes each. (Note: Both Amcits reported that they were fine and that, after being unable to venture outside for four days following the March 14 riots, things in Lhasa were now beginning to return to normal.) Other diplomats later complained that citizens whom they had requested that the MFA/TAR FAO invite were not contacted.

Visit to Jokhang Temple, "Monks are Sleeping"

¶116. (C) Around 01:00 March 29, all delegation members, except PolOff, received calls in their hotel rooms that the start time for the next morning had been moved up from 08:30 to 08:00. According to the Australian participant, when delegation members boarded the vans just before 08:00, organizers told them there had been a "change in the schedule" but offered no details. As the motorcade departed just prior to 08:00, several delegation members noted the absence of some of the diplomats and requested that the motorcade wait. MFA/TAR FAO handlers refused. (Note: Three other diplomats who, unlike PolOff, knew about the time change but arrived at the motorcade just at 08:00, were left behind and also missed the trip to the Jokhang.) PolOff's request that he be allowed to catch up to the motorcade by taxi was refused. The Government minders, according to those who made it on the bus, were extremely nervous and appeared desperate to complete the visit to Jokhang as rapidly as possible. The diplomats only realized that they were being taken to the Jokhang Temple as they pulled into Barkhor Square.

¶117. (C) Upon arrival, the diplomats noticed a much larger security contingent than at other events on the trip. Officials were "extremely nervous" during the visit, several diplomats later told PolOff. Other than the delegation and the escorts/security, Barkhor Square and the surrounding streets were abandoned.

Little, if any, damage to shops in the Barkhor was noticeable, according to U.K. Political Counselor Peter Wilson. The MFA/TAR FAO officials escorted the group into the temple where they met with a single monk who is a member of the Jokhang's Democratic

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Management Committee. When the group asked to see the monks involved in the March 27 demonstration in front of foreign journalists, the monk said they and the other monks were all in their dorm "sleeping." The monk said that his colleagues who had participated in the incident were "young and lacked understanding," but they would not be punished. Wilson noted that the Jokhang is usually packed with pilgrims. The monk said that the temple was closed for the day but would reopen tomorrow. Several diplomats left the Temple early in disgust and then staged a mini-protest, refusing to get back on the bus while they debated whether to continue with the visit. They eventually decided to proceed with the schedule. Australian Political Officer Eleanor Lawson, who had requested to TAR Chairman Qiangba Puncog that the Jokhang be added to the schedule and later was outspokenly critical of the poor handling of the Temple visit, told PolOff that MFA Director General for External Security Affairs Wang Min later pulled her aside and demanded that she "stop causing trouble." (Comment: PolOff's requests on March 28 to venture out alone, as well as his delivery of USG points on Tibet to both TAR Chairman Qiangba and MFA VFM Wu, may have prompted organizers to exclude PolOff from the sensitive Jokhang trip. While a simple administrative oversight cannot be ruled out, when PolOff complained about being excluded, TAR FAO officials merely insisted that "everyone was called.")

More Visits with Victims, Hospitals

¶18. (C) Following the Jokhang Temple stop (after which PolOff and others who had missed the Jokhang visit rejoined the main group), the diplomats visited the offices of the Chengguan District Government. While there, four Tibetans and one Han resident described the events of March 14. Several told of having their stores and homes destroyed, saying they were living on Government assistance. Chen Xiaoxiong (a Han Chinese) told of how her shop was destroyed, causing RMB 2.6 million (\$370,000) in damage, and how ethnic Tibetans had protected her and provided her with shelter. "With the support of the Party and my friends, I am confident I can start my life again," Chen said.

¶19. (C) This meeting produced the most unscripted moment of the entire trip: In response to a question regarding the composition of the rioters, a Tibetan resident offered that most were "unemployed." A Chengguan District Government official then chimed in saying that, actually, the rioters were "lazy" people who refused to work despite abundant opportunities to participate in Government job-training programs. The same official, in contradiction to the TAR Chairman's comments that prices are stable, said inflation is a problem and that the Government is providing extra support for victims to cope with rising costs. The group then visited a People's Armed Police hospital and saw injured PAP officers (both Han and Tibetan), including some in intensive care beds. The delegation then proceeded to Lhasa's Regional People's Hospital. Outside the second hospital, ambulances with smashed windows were on display. Hospital officials relayed a story that a mob had attacked one ambulance, which was carrying a small child at the time. Diplomats later met with a (Tibetan) doctor injured during the attack on the ambulance.

Living Buddhas Denounce "Splittist" Dalai Lama

¶20. (C) At the final meeting of the trip (the one mentioned above that included foreign residents), diplomats heard a briefing by Tibetan scholars and religious figures. The briefing was heavy on propaganda with an emphasis on Tibet's social and economic progress since the "peaceful liberation" of ¶1951. The primary speaker was Drubkang, the Chairman of the Tibetan Buddhist Association. Drupkang, in response to a question on whether he considered the Dalai Lama a real living Buddha, gave a lengthy denunciation of the "unpatriotic" 14th Dalai Lama but

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fell short of denouncing the Dalai Lama's legitimacy as a reincarnate. The Dalai Lama's use of violence runs counter to the key tenets of Buddhism, he said. Drubkang added that the participation of monks in the unrest shows that monasteries need to increase their legal education of young monks. Another living Buddha asserted that Western countries should do more to educate their young people about the "real" situation in Tibet and counter widespread "prejudice" against Tibet outside China. The Government has spent huge sums rebuilding monasteries and providing medical care and other benefits to monks, he said, adding that the only "conflict" in Tibet was the long-standing struggle between separatists and anti-separatists. Following this meeting, the delegation departed for the airport and returned to Beijing.

Comment

¶21. (C) Although some of the events on this trip were crudely stage managed, it is clear that Lhasa has suffered widespread ethnic-based violence and rioting. A large percentage of the population, Han and Tibetan, have suffered great economic loss, both from the rioting itself and the cancellation of tour groups. Despite our hosts' efforts to portray Lhasa as a city quickly bouncing back, the frantic visit to the Barkhor/Jokhang Temple, with its heavy security presence, appeared to indicate that tensions remain high in the Tibetan quarter of the city.

¶22. (C) Comment continued: Interlocutors' complete lack of candor regarding the underlying social factors contributing to the riots, while not unexpected, was disturbing nonetheless. Even the "average people" diplomats met with resorted to stock propaganda phrases (e.g., "Dalai Lama clique" and "beating, smashing, looting, burning") while denying Tibetan society had any problems other than the lingering presence of a few "separatists." One Amcit resident of Lhasa (protect), however, told PolOff during the trip that he believes the city's Tibetan youths are becoming "radicalized." An increasing number of young Tibetans in Lhasa, he said, become angry when they are addressed in Mandarin Chinese and refuse to speak China's official language. Nevertheless, he and the other long-term foreign residents PolOff spoke with appeared to believe that, even if ethnic tensions remain, tourists will return, NGO projects will go forward and Lhasa will continue its current path of rapid, albeit increasingly Han-dominated, development.

RANDIT